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A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JOHNNIE BERNHARD, AUTHOR OF "SISTERS OF THE UNDERTOW"

 JANUARY 29, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

AM: Johnnie, I'm so happy to see *Sisters of the Undertow* in its final form. I've waited months to hold it in my hand! I enjoyed spending the weekend together at the Mississippi Book Festival last year. We had a great panel, didn't we?

JB: It was a great panel of literary discussion with you and author Bren McClain. What made it particularly enjoyable is that we have all worked together at different conferences or through *Southern Literary Review* prior to the festival. This allowed for a true kinship with open, honest conversation. Of course, your collected interviews with authors, *Writers on Writing*, allowed for the perfect stepping point for that conversation. I do remember quite a few belly laughs while sitting on the panel with you and Bren. That's always a good thing, Allen.

AM: For some reason, your beautiful and profound opening passages made me think of Jacob and Esau, of how they jostled each other in Rebekah's womb. Only Kimberly Ann Hodges and Kathy Renee Hodges—sisters—are born a year and a half apart. They're not twins like Jacob and Esau, but they "jostle" each other. They're like batteries pushed apart by the same charge, and their differences and struggles affect their entire family. "We were sisters," Kim says. "I loved and hated her."

JB: That's an interesting comparison, Allen. Yes, there's no mistaking the powerful undertow of sibling rivalry. I think it is very true that people in intimate relationships can love and hate, equally. This can be said about marriage, as well. Love and hate are the most passionate emotions. We run into trouble with our relationships when we are indifferent, when those passions burn out.

I also think it is interesting to observe the different personalities born into a family, despite the same set of parents. There's an ethereal quality to that. Our earliest relationships are forged with our parent(s) and siblings. It is often a stepping point for how we learn to love and trust later in life.

AM: The girls' mother, Sandy, has three miscarriages before bringing Kim into the world on Christmas. Kim's birth is healthy, but Kathy's isn't. Is it correct to say that Kathy Renee's premature birth causes her mental disability? Or is the cause more ambiguous than that?

JB: I did quite a bit of research on the emotional impact of multiple miscarriages, including several interviews with women who have suffered through this.

In the novel, Sandy is obsessed with giving her premature daughter every chance in the world for a healthy life. It eventually takes it toll on the entire family. The other family members find ways to cope with this stress. Kim, the protagonist, escapes with books.



Johnnie Bernhard

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AM: The story has all the markings of a bildungsroman.

JB: Yes, in many ways *Sisters of the Undertow* follows the formative years of Kim, as she matures, both mentally and spiritually, but where it differs from most bildungsroman novels is Kim, our protagonist is not the hero. The hero is the most likely character of all. Let's not give that away for the reader, Allen!

AM: Homecomings, school dances, AP classes—for some people these are fond memories, but for others they're painful. Either way, they're formative, don't you think?

JB: Absolutely! People are going to perceive life's experiences based on personality, environment, social interaction, etc. It's fascinating to me that there can be so many different points of views for a shared event.

AM: Ocean Springs makes an appearance in the book. That's where you live now. In fact, I was fortunate to have lunch with you there last year. What a charming place!

JB: Ocean Springs was founded in 1699 by a French explorer. With that history, it has become a melting pot of artists, locals, fishermen, military retirees, all merged in both the old and new South. As an author, I'm inspired by its natural beauty. I live between a saltwater marsh and the Mississippi Sound. On that sliver of land are oak trees hundreds of years old.

My character from Ocean Springs is an embodiment of what I love about living here.

AM: Your rendering of college and college life rang true.

The rendering of college and college life as represented in the novel holds true for many generations of men and women. It doesn't necessarily define the Eighties; rather it is an observation of the things that can happen to a young adult when leaving home for the first time.

AM: Do you like E.M. Forster? I noticed the reference to *A Passage to India*.

JB: Absolutely! Every novel mentioned in *Sisters of the Undertow* is a small tribute to those authors. Remember, Kim becomes a librarian at a public library. She is a life-long reader, first as a coping

mechanism as a child, later as a means of pleasure and escape as an adult. Books are powerful!

AM: Could you say something about the role of religion in the novel?

JB: Religion, as presented in the novel, is set as a life-long debate between the two sisters. As the author, it mirrors many of the conversations we are having in today's culture. I would never tell the reader what to believe; rather, I present dialogue or scenes in the novel I hope the reader will feel or think about.

What has been amazing for me as an author is that I am published by a public university press and read by people of all ages, nationalities, and religions. My novels always contain elements of current social issues – immigration, religion, homelessness, the role of the family – all of these are universal concepts. There should be no divisions with matters of the heart and conscience.

AM: Thank you for doing this interview, Johnnie! Maybe we'll get to do another panel together soon.

JB: I'd love that, Allen. Thank you and *Southern Literary Review* for your continued support.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

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